

Webtoons: from the digital support to the multimedia hipergenre on comics

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Abstract

This paper proposes to analyze the phenomenon of Webtoon in its conceptual complexity, which involves everything from the construction of reading platforms to the creation of a new style of comics. The aim is to describe how the concept of webtoon has evolved over the years, starting from digital comics and a more restricted version of what we call webcomics. It also aims to analyze how the main characteristics of the format affect production and consumption. Among the distinctions analyzed, we present the authorial intention, the issue of the software used for reading, the use of animation and audio, and finally the final destination of the product. The research was conducted through bibliographic and documentary analysis focusing on the conceptualization of the comic book hypergenre proposed by Paulo Ramos and the conceptualization of the format by Sean Kleefeld. We find that webtoon is a powerful comic book format with potential in various areas due to its ease of multimedia and narrative adaptation.

Keywords: Webtoon; comic; hypergenre.

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INTRODUCTION

Webcomics is a largely used term in Brazil that is associated with a graphic story or a comic book published online in a form any reader can access it from a device such as a computer, tablet or mobile screen. A very important characteristic of the webcomics is that in it the traditional formats of the printed industry, very close to the comic books or comic strips vehiculated on papers, is transported to digital media. For instance, the online strip featuring Armandinho, a very successful character created by Alexandre Beck, once a great hit on social networks (mainly Facebook), made the opposite way, being therefore published on book form. Webtoons is a way of making comics specifically aimed for online purposes, in a special format. Its narrative is not the usual page-by-page scheme, but a series of interactive processes with eventual aid of new visual and multimedia resources.

This paper intends to describe the webtoons concept and how it has changed over the years, starting with electronic comics (Luiz, 2010), and analyze the way the main characteristics of this support can affect production and diffusion. We intend to display the differences concerning principles in authorship, the reading software, animation and audio and the final product destination. The research abridges vast bibliography and a great corpus of documentation, focusing on the comics “hipergenre” concept as proposed by Paulo Ramos (2009) and the format concept by Sean Kleefeld (2020).

JUSTIFICATION

Webtoons are within an evolution process concerning comics on digital media. This evolution occurred on a quick basis, time that proved itself not enough to massify nor mature the consummation of the first phases of the process. Professor Edgar Franco (2001) appointed on his researches the neologism “comictronic” (hqrtrônico in Portuguese), meaning a form not yet a proper webcomic, but digital comics that predates the internet. Reader does not need internet for reading such a material. They were experimental projects, colorized comics and sometimes computer drawn. The reader went to a newsstand, bookshop or drugstore, bought a CD-ROM that came with a magazine or was sold alone. The CD presented to the public features such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, idiom courses, videogames, guides to video renting and, most notably for our purposes, experimental comics. It was necessary to install the contents of the CD for the personal computer being able to read it all.

This may be the very first example of digital comics that ever was, a phenomenon Edgar Franco (Luiz, 2013) baptized as “comictronic”. As the internet came and expanded, animated gifs (moving little images) appeared on scene. A new generation of comics developed by plugin Flash user creators came to light on the brink of the 21st century, an era that testified the transposition of

¹ Translated by: Filipe Augusto Chamy Amorim Ferreira.

comics to the digital ambience of the web (Muniz, 2017). There were the hypermedia resources and mediatic convergence, not to mention the development of the fan engagement (Jenkins, 2009). The main example in Brazil was the “Combo Rangers” comics, inspired by the “Power Rangers” North American franchise. Success in Brazil signified a great quantity of copies both in style and in format. This first digital comics generation got to be consumed over the internet and may very well be already called webcomics.

A second generation came around 2005, when new programs offered to the authors the possibility to edit both image and audio. That became more financially accessible to those creators and new webcomics begin to explore multimedia areas. By then, next to 2000, there was an academic discussion about whether webcomics could be considered real comics or not, due to the use of music, animation and new interactive forms (Luiz, 2013). Another related feature was the infinite screen, the only difference being it was accessed on personal computer screens.

At the same time there came a technological leap when smartphones and broadband internet showed out. The new devices enabled another way of consuming, another cultural production, that made webcomics nearer what we know of it nowadays. It is important to remember the role a single country represented on discussing the popularization of the format: South Korea. Much is said about Japan and the internationalized success of the manga production (Kozhakhmetova, 2012). But we must consider it is a difficult exportation case because Japanese copyright holders tend to have complex thoughts about licensed merchandise.

South Korea was crucial to webcomics popularization (Nogueira, 2021) and this was originated from a long-term cultural politics that also was intended to show to the world a modern and technological country. An eastern example is observed on the long comic story entitled 88 Olympics (Olimpíada, 1988), concerning the Olympic Games that took place in Seul in 1988. This work was part of a Disney brand and was created by Italian artist Romano Scarpa. Donald Duck’s triplet nephews were the protagonists of a story about a couple that came from both North and South Korea. What stands out is the way the author details the dreams of South Korean people to export to the world an image of brand-new technology, related to communication, television, satellites, video and audio production. This represents the first Korean “soft power” wave, destined to internationally promote the Korean products (Pegoraro, 2018). It is not by hazard that, since then, we could notice the emergence of a plethora of Korean brands, such as Samsung, LG, Hyundai, among others. Soft power was a concept developed by Joseph Nye (1991) to define the “suave impact” some countries display to influence or create cultural hegemony, rather than use military or economical enforcement.

Nonetheless, at the turning of the century, mainly between 1994 and 2001, it occurred a series of economic crisis, in such places as Mexico, Argentine and Russia, as well as an internet crisis and the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. In that scenario, the Asian Tigers crisis, in 1997, had a singular impact on South Korea, with a great impact on many Korean companies, especially on electronics. Facing that scenario, South Korean govern, emerging from a dictatorship, recognized the necessity of expanding the economy and thus investing on culture as a long-term “soft power” method.

Throughout the years, it is noticeable a gradual expansion on investments on cultural products, with strategic initiatives to conquer local, regional and international markets. Notable examples include South Korean pop music, represented by the hit “Gangnam Style”, by pop singer Psy, and the global success of the BTS boy band, not to mention the South Korean cinema, with films such as acclaimed award-winning “Parasite”, and television series such as “Round 6”.

It is perceivable a strategic structure beyond these initiatives, South Korea intending to establish their presence on different media forms and, subsequently, to persuade the international distribution platforms such as Netflix to acquire and license their products. Over the last years it is noticeable a considerable amount of investment on comics and games as well, with emphasis on

webtoons, a South Korean creation that has become a fundamental axis to the entertainment industry, a word almost synonym with digital comics due to its enormous influence, of international standards. The South Korean Webtoon support soon became one of the main platforms to globally produce and distribute webcomics. This phenomenon of the Korean wave (Nogueira, 2021) reflects the country's gradual investment on culture, a budget dimensioned on about R\$ 25 billion, much more than many other countries have invested. As a comparison, Brazil's budget in 2003 was about R\$ 4 or 5 billion, while on Bolsonaro's administration it got as low as R\$ 1 billion per year.

LANGUAGE AND HYBRIDISM

Within the discussions concerning the definition of comics, many attempts are known throughout the years to analyze the structure of this narrative media, especially if it is considered the creators' boldness in defying the "rules". Paulo Ramos (2009) introduced the concept therefore known as "hipergenre", stating comics abridge a plethora of genres and subgenres, mixing different narrative forms. It is this hybrid nature that allow many experimentations on comics, webtoons included.

Alexandra Presser (2020) states that a webtoon can be analyzed considering a series of digital comics subgenres, destined to be read on a small screen, especially if they are intended to the infinite scrolling of mobile devices. Nonetheless, the fluid nature of digital comics makes it complicate to clearly define the many forms of webcomics, because they frequently get crossed and mixed over each other. One example of this hybrid nature (Burke, 2003) is the "Heartstopper" webtoon, by Alice Oseman (2019), published on a weekly basis on Tapas and Webtoon platforms. Although conceived for digital reading, its author carefully planned the transposition of her webtoon to a printed version, which demonstrates the fluidity between media formats. Defining webtoons is a complex task due to its capacity to transcend traditional limits and adapt itself to a great variety of formats and supports. Scholars study webtoon features and their rapports to other visual narrative medias, while webtoon creators keep defying preestablished conventions, innovating each and every time.

Adapting webtoons into a printed format represents a significant challenge, mainly due to the differences on language and reading experience between the two medias. For instance, while webtoons frequently use blank spaces to create sound and time effects, this feature can be hard to reply on printed form, where space is very limited and the text can suffer from the compressing.

Figure 1 - An example of how space is developed on a webtoon in order to create a time effect.



Fonte: Shá (2020).

Another relevant aspect of this analysis lies on the reading support media to webtoons, that can vary from internet browsers to special apps. Differently from other digital comics that demand specific apps for reading, webtoons are frequently accessible on a great variety of devices and supports, which adds more complexity to the media definition. There are also multimedia aspects, animations and audios, that can influence the reading experience and bring questions about the narrative nature of the work (Presser, 2020). While certain additions can maintain the interesting and focus of the reader, other can transform him into a passive spectator as well, by changing the fundamental dynamics of the narrative. It is crucial to remember the influence of historical and cultural context to construct mediation. Authors such as Bakhtin, Chartier and Miller insist on the idea readers are not simply passive receptors, but active agents in transforming mediating practices.

And finally, there is the final destination of webtoons, many times adapted to other media formats such as television series, films or books. The commercial success of webtoons many times is related to these derivative products, as part of the public do not know the true origins of the works they consume. Webtoons and other digital comics are a continuous challenge to be defined, even by scholars and professionals from the area. The fluid nature of the media and its constant evolution demand a flexible approach, an attentive view to the production nuances and consuming of digital comics.

To reinforce the complexity of the matter, webtoons can also display paratexts, a complementary material for the external reading of the main line of story. They may include commentary, extra pages that were not on the original digital version, appendix, glossary. It becomes necessary a flexible approach that considers not only format or shape and the content of the story or narrative, but also the complementary elements, the contexts of both production and reception.

There are three relevant aspects by which one should consider the hybridism of webtoons as well as their language. The first one is the author's intent. Does the author see himself as a webtoon creator? It is a questionable criterion. There are many examples of authors creating webtoons and then these works are adapted to another media. Or even webcomics that were originally created for printed support. One case for illustration: Chris Ware made a deal with British newspaper *The Guardian*, according to which he would publish one strip of "The Last Saturday" series. Nonetheless, the series was never published on printed paper. The newspaper vehiculated it as webcomic on its website. Ware found out his work was strictly online when he was informed while on a fan meeting. This is the reason Kleefeld (2020) reinforces the statement that "the author must now if he is developing webcomics or not". One parameter may be, for instance, what was the first media platform chosen for publishing. If the comics were first vehiculated on digital support, it would be a webcomic or a webtoon.

Be as it may, it is a trick question. Considering this Chris Ware's webcomic, it presents a clear heritage from comic strips such as "Garfield", "Hagar" and "Calvin & Hobbes", among many others. All the strips are registered on the paper's platforms, the central point being they are publicized on digital support before reach readers on printed form. Newspapers such as *Folha de S. Paulo* are delivered on printed material to readers every morning, the newsstands selling the issues as well, although by midnight the comic strips are already available on the online support. Therefore, we can consider this a digital, printed or, most easily, hybrid production. What is important here is to comprehend the authorial intentionality, how the creators thought the work could be primarily read.

Another aspect is the support for webtoon reading. It is possible to read a webtoon on browser, mobile phone or internet connected television device. The main feature of a webtoon is that it does not need an app or a reading software. It is very different from other digital comics

because it does not need a software such as the Acrobat Reader to convert into PDF a download file in which there lies the comics or material in general.

Although there is a flexibility on reading support, there is also an app called Webtoon, not required for the consumers. Yet is relevant to point out that there are different apps for online reading only, and other apps that permit downloading for future reading. Brazilian platforms such as Social Comics and the Funktoon already offer a great variety of digital comics, but a platform specifically dedicated to webtoons in Portuguese translated versions could fulfill another blank space on the market and attract a considerable audience.

The third aspect is the utilization of audio and animation multimedia features. Webtoons are constituted by multimedia or hypermedia features, and it can be very simple to use the theoretical elements of comics language (Ramos, 2010) to point out if something is or is not comics on discussing webtoons, which can lead to quarrelling. We know animation and comics are different languages (Barbieri, 2017; Denis, 2010). To end that discussion, Kleefeld (2020) says that, as it happens with sound, what occurs is that space can define time on comics. Webtoons display the use of blank spaces to show the time slowly been dragged on. When we consider animation, there is created a rhythm to read this scene. Kleefeld (2020) explains that when we have an animation or an audio piece that do not take away the reader active role, it is maintained the comic aspect on the support being read. Therefore, when we think about looping animations on webtoons, they are constituted by very short and fast action. That does not take away the active role from the reader that is going along with the narrative, and the rhythm control of reading remains. When animation is extensive and can modify narrative, it can cause a void on the reading rhythm, because the reader adopts a passive posture while he waits what will happen in the story.

The same thing happens with audio. These aspects need to be analyzed very cautiously, because many authors do not use preestablished rules. There are even more radical examples of the readers' active role on the matter. In recent South Korean webtoons the reader can use his mobile phone to experiment virtually increased interactions, in which the reader can be himself a character on the story. He can be a supportive character, be part of the action in some way and then go out. It is a kind of interaction very difficult to preserve when the work is adapted into another media.

The idea of using QR Codes on printed books in order to offer tridimensional features or extra content is an innovative way of combining digital and material world. Many printed webtoons books use this kind of code so the reader can access the related texts. That does not only reduce the need for the inclusion of complementary materials on printed form, but it can also make the access experience more interactive, especially if it relates to multimedia production. This combination of medias can not only make reading more attractive but enable more engagement from the reader towards the content as well.

Figure 2 - “Heartstopper”: a webtoon that reached new audiences with its adaptation in book form and as a live action Netflix series



Source: Webtoon (2022).

Besides the authorial identity we already discussed, there is also the final webtoons destination issue. They are read by many, they are each time more popular, but can we consider them a profitable production to their creators? The derivative products, mainly the audiovisual adaptations to streaming platforms, show that is a very good way for commercial exploitation. One example can be pointed out on the very successful series “Heartstopper” and the animated Netflix feature “Nimona”. Webtoons is a hybrid genre of work even if we consider the matter of digital material preservation.

The possibility of virtual platforms getting canceled or digital material just disappearing is a legitimate concern to readers and authors. The transition of digital media to printed form many times is a way of assuring the preservation of the content and make the work available even if the support cease existing. It is interesting to see how readers often chose to acquire printed versions of their favorite works as a way of assuring their existence. It is important to consider strategies that can preserve online content, with the aid of personal backups, printed material or initiatives tending to build up digital archives, such as the Web Archive, be limited as it may.

Preserving the digital patrimony is a shared responsibility among authors, publishing medias and readers. It is a very complex matter that requires continuous consideration in order to guarantee the digital works can be appreciated and accessed by future generations.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Webcomics keep being developed throughout several levels of innovation and experimentation. Since the first digital comics to the highly sophisticated interactive narrative experiences of today, they have continuously played a crucial role in digital culture, amplifying the borders of visual storytelling and compelling different audiences all over the world.

From the point of view of cultural production, webtoons represent one of the best examples of a national soft power, South Korea not only exporting its own productions but also exploring new formats by creators from all over the globe, to remarkable results. We can observe the continuous use of different technological innovations in producing and consuming, from multimedia tools, QR Code and expanded reality up to new ways of a reader engaging and active interaction with the storytelling.

Webtoons, just as regular printed comics, are a source of audiovisual, cinematic and streaming adapted productions, with usually regarded as positive results. Printed media adaptations are getting good feedback, regardless of quality issues and limitations concerning the conversion of multimedia elements to analogical support. One point still in need of consideration lies on the greatest opening to diversity on webtoons. Due to the production and reception formats, their commercial risk is considered low, and the narratives are much more open to different aesthetics and cultural idiosyncrasies, especially if we point out peripheric and identitarian examples. It is important to amplify academic debate in order to continue the discussion about new formats and approaches, as well as different possibilities webtoons allow to society.

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